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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the importance of sentence topic in written discourse. Training second language writers to identify sentence topics in drafts of their written work has been proposed as a central means of helping writers achieve greater coherence. The study explored the notion that "topic" is a psychological rather than linguistic concept, and that its use in various forms of pedagogical intervention is therefore likely to be problematic. In the study, 24 native English speakers and 40 learners of English as a Second Language were asked to identify sentence topics in a scientific report. Results indicate that the notion of topic was difficult for both groups. In some instances, divergence in responses suggested that a reader-based factor such as background knowledge affects choice of sentence topic. In other instances, different responses can be attributed to the structure of the sentence, in which two noun phrases compete. It is concluded that to pursue the issue of topic as a linguistic or psychological construct would not be productive because the situation appears more complex, and the interaction of linguistic and psychological elements is of greater concern. (MSE)

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On the psychological plausibility of 'topic' as a construct in research on writing

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Abstract

This paper describes an empirical investigation into the salience of sentence 'topic' in written discourse. Training second language writers to identify sentence topics in drafts of their written work has been proposed as a central means of helping writers achieve greater coherence. The point of departure for this study is the notion that 'topic' is a psychological rather than a linguistic concept, and that its employment in various forms of pedagogical intervention is therefore likely to be problematic. In this study, twenty-four native speakers and forty second language speakers of English were asked to identify the sentence topics in a scientific report. The study showed that the notion of 'topic' was indeed problematic for both native speakers and non-native speakers. Of particular interest, both from the perspective of discourse analysis and also in terms of pedagogical intervention is why certain sentences were more problematic than others. The implications of the study are presented and discussed.

Background

The concept of discourse coherence has fascinated discourse analysts and language educators, particularly those working with foreign language students in tertiary contexts, for a number of years now. Discourse analysts inquire into what it is that constitutes coherent discourse. What is it, in other words, that distinguishes a text which is perceived by the listener or reader as 'hanging together', from a random collection of sentences? Language educators, on the other hand, are more concerned with the practical question of helping students produce coherent discourse.

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This particular area of research lies in the rather ill-defined terrain that borders the disciplines of linguistics, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics and cognitive psychology. In fact, a review of the literature had been expected to turn up references to the psychological salience of discourse topic in the cognitive psychology literature, but this proved not to be the case. There may well be studies, but I was unable to uncover any that were directly relevant. In any case, such studies on discourse processing as do exist within the cognitive psychology literature are of limited relevance because they almost invariably use artificially constructed "texts", and propositional analysis (see, for example, Garrod et al. 1994).

A debate which is currently preoccupying applied linguists concerns the extent to which discourse coherence resides within the reader/listener or the text. This debate goes back at least as far as 1976 when Halliday and Hasan produced their widely cited text *Cohesion in English*. In this

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work, Halliday and Hasan argue that coherence in written texts is created by various cohesive devices. They would argue that in the following texts, for instance, coherence is created by the anaphoric reference item 'it'.

"The weather turned bitterly cold last Saturday. It also turned extremely wet."

"The weather turned bitterly cold last Saturday. Unfortunately, it was the day of the annual church picnic."

The notion that cohesion 'creates' coherence has been widely contested in the literature. Widdowson (1978), for instance, presented samples of discourse which, while they are readily perceived as coherent, do not contain any cohesive devices whatsoever. While the examples are attenuated and artificial, they serve to make the logical point that, while natural texts might contain cohesive devices of one sort or another, such devices do not create coherence. Hasan subsequently proposed the notion of cohesive 'harmony', arguing that discourse coherence is associated not with isolated elements, but with cohesive 'chains' which draw textual elements together.

A lucid recent account of the contribution of cohesion to coherence is provided in Hoey (1991). Hoey poses three questions:

1. How does the presence of cohesion contribute to the coherence of a text?
2. How does the presence of cohesion affect the ways in which sentences are perceived to be related to each other as complete propositions?
3. Does cohesion contribute to creating the larger organization of a text (if such exists)?

Hoey addresses his questions by reviewing the literature which demonstrates that coherence is not synonymous with cohesion. He concludes his review by claiming that cohesion is a property of the text, while coherence is a facet of a reader's (and, presumably, in the case of aural texts, a listener's) evaluation of a text. Notwithstanding this, he argues that cohesion does contribute to a text's organisation, and therefore to the perception of coherence in text.

Lautamatti (1990) agrees that cohesion is an epiphenomenon of coherent discourse, and suggests that perceptions of coherence are conditioned by the ongoing topic of the discourse. She distinguishes between interactional coherence and propositional coherence, and argues that the extent to which propositions are overtly marked by cohesive devices will depend on interpersonal factors such as the degree of intimacy of the interlocutors, the extent of shared knowledge and so on. Her article is interesting because it demonstrates the inextricable links between various elements and levels within discourse, including formal cohesion, discourse topics, propositional knowledge, and contextual factors such as interlocutor relationships. It is the task of the discourse analyst to tease out these relationships, and to identify the relative contributions each makes to the processing and production of coherent discourse.

van Dijk (1977) attempts to formalise the notion of 'topic', linking it to propositional logic. However, Brown and Yule (1983) take issue with van Dijk's presentation of discourse topic, pointing out that the concept itself is problematic.

> What must be of concern to linguists interested in notions such as 'discourse topic' is the fact that the formal means of identifying the topic for a piece of discourse claimed by van Dijk is, in fact, an illusion. Neither the topic representation nor the semantic representation of the whole text derive from anything more formal than the analyst's interpretation of what the text means. To produce the discourse topic, van Dijk does nothing more than what schoolchildren are frequently asked to do by their English teacher - produce a single sentence summary for the text under consideration. As any English

> teacher knows, this exercise is considerably easier with some passages (simple descriptive or narrative) than others (discursive or explanatory prose) and it inevitably produces a variety of different, though certainly related, interpretations of what must be included in the single 'topic' sentence. (Brown and Yule 1983, p.110)

Turning to pedagogy, several writing specialists (Lautamatti, 1978; Witte, 1983a, 1983b; Connor & Farmer, 1990) have suggested that topical structure analysis is a promising technique for improving the coherence of written work. Lautamatti (1978) develops a technique for analysing writing in terms of the relationship between the discourse topic and the sentence topics which make up a text. She argues that texts can be developed in three different ways, and that these ways are evident in the distribution of topics in succeeding sentences in a text. The first of these is through *parallel progression*, in which the topics of succeeding sentences in a text are semantically identical. The second is *sequential progression*. Here the topic of each succeeding sentence is different. In *extended parallel progression*, there is a return to a topic which has already been instantiated in an earlier sentence. Examples of each of these types of progression are set out in table 1.

Table 1: Types of sentence progression identified by Lautamatti

Parallel progression
The ability to carry electricity varies according to the extent to which substances contain electrons which are free to move. It is not something possessed by all substances.

1. The ability to carry electricity
2. It

Sequential progression
The ability to carry electricity varies according to the extent to which substances contain electrons which are free to move. Some substances contain few such molecules, and are therefore poor conductors.

1. The ability to carry electricity
2. Some substances

Extended parallel progression
The ability to carry electricity varies according to the extent to which substances contain electrons which are free to move. Some substances contain few such molecules, and are therefore poor conductors. This ability has been closely studied by physicists in recent years.

1. The ability to carry electricity
2. Some substances
3. This ability

Several empirical investigations have been conducted into the use of topical structure analysis in teaching writing to second language speakers. Witte (1983a; 1983b) used the concept as a tool to investigate the revision process, and also as a device for studying perceptions of the quality of students' writing.

More recently, Connor and Farmer (1990, pp.126-139)) have reported on their experiences in using topical structure analysis as a revision tool for ESL students in intermediate and advanced-level college writing classes. Students are taken through the steps involved in

identifying topics and producing topical structure diagrams. They then apply the techniques to their own writing, usually after the production of a first draft.

Connor and Farmer report success with the technique, although the data here are anecdotal. (Their paper is a report on a pedagogical innovation, not a presentation of the outcomes of a piece of empirical research.) They report that:

> Student response has been positive; many have remarked that the procedure helps them to examine the meanings of their sentences and forces them to relate these meanings to the main topic and purpose of their writing. When we teach the analysis as a revision tool, we note improvement in student writing, specifically in regard to clearer focus (thanks to added extended parallel progression) and better development of subtopics (thanks to improved ratio of parallel and sequential progressions). (Connor and Farmer 1990, p.134).

In a preliminary investigation into the resources drawn upon by second language writers in transforming propositional content into coherent discourse, Nunan (1994) presented a group of second language writers in an EAP programme with a set of atomistic propositions derived from a science report. Among other things, he found a great deal of diversity in the topical structure patterns which emerged from the students' writing.

Although the studies and reports reviewed here are interesting and valuable in their own right, they leave some questions unanswered, and raise several more. Implicit in the Connor and Farmer report, for example, is the notion that there is some ideal ratio of parallel and sequential progressions. Such assumptions are, I believe, highly problematic. Also problematic is the assumption that sentence topics can be readily identified within written discourse, that they are, in fact, properties of the text, in much the same way as formal cohesion is a property of text. It is this particular notion that I should like to contest. The point of departure for the study reported here is the assertion that 'topic' is a psychological construct rather than a linguistic concept, and, as such, resides within the creator / processor of the text, rather than within the text itself.

Another area of research which is relevant to the study described below is that which addresses the question of whether learning a second language is like learning a first. The great bulk of this research, however, focuses on issues of peripheral interest here such as whether items of morphosyntax in a given language area acquired in the same order by first and second language learners. In terms of discourse processing, relatively little work has been done. In the early eighties, Nunan (1984) investigated similarities and differences in the discourse processing operations of first and second language learners. He found that in relation to the acquisition of cohesion, the similarities outweighed the differences. One of the interesting outcomes of this study was that there was an interaction between the experiential content knowledge of both first and second language speakers and their control of various forms of cohesion, particularly cohesive conjunction. Given the paucity of research into the processing of discourse by first and second language speakers, it was decided to build a comparative dimension into the study of the perception of sentence topics in written discourse.

The Study

Questions

From the review of the literature, it would seem that 'topic' is potentially a useful concept both for applied linguistic analysis, and also for pedagogical intervention. However, as I have argued above, the assumption that 'topic' is an unproblematic notion is one which should not go uncontested. The purpose of this study is therefore to explore the psychological salience of 'topic' in a comparative study involving both first and second language speakers.

The study was set up to explore the following questions which emerge from the above review of the relevant literature:

- How salient are sentence topics in written discourse?
- Are there discernible differences between native and non-native speakers of English in the identification of sentence topics in written discourse?

Subjects

Subjects were twenty-four native speakers of English who were undertaking a postgraduate degree in Applied Linguistics in the United States, and forty undergraduate speakers of English as a foreign language in Hong Kong.

Procedure

The purpose of the study was explained to subjects during the course of one of their regularly scheduled class meetings. Approval to carry out the study and report the results was sought and obtained. Subjects were then provided with the following set of instructions, which were explained to them. Any questions or points of clarification were dealt with, and subjects were then given as much time as they needed to complete the task.

Table 2: Instructions and text passage for study

Thank you for taking the time to complete this task. The aim of the task is to investigate whether readers of English have difficulty in identifying sentence topics in scientific discourse.

Instructions:

Please read the following text. After you have read the text, please look at the list of phrases which appears below the text and circle the phrase that represents the topic of each sentence in the text.

[The topic is simply what the sentence is about. For example, in the sentence: "In the late 1960s, school desegregation in the southern United States became a fact of life", the topic is 'school desegregation'.]

TEXT

As far as the ability to carry electricity is concerned, we can place most substances into one of two groups. The first group consists of materials with many electrons that are free to move. These materials are called conductors because they readily carry or conduct electric currents. Conductors are mostly metals but also include graphite. The second group consists of materials with very few electrons that are free to move. These materials are called non-conductors and are very poor conductors of electricity. Non-conductors can prevent electricity from going where it is not wanted. Hence they are also called insulators. Some common insulators are glass, rubber, plastic and air. There are a few materials, such as germanium and silicon, called semiconductors. Their ability to conduct electricity is intermediate between conductors and insulators. Semiconductors have played an important role in modern electronics.

Sentence	Possible sentence topics (please circle the phrase that you think represents the sentence topic)
1.	the ability to carry electricity / we / most substances / one of two groups
2.	the first group / materials / electrons
3.	these materials / conductors / they / electric currents
4.	conductors / metals / graphite.
5.	the second group / materials / electrons
6.	these materials / non-conductors / conductors / electricity.
7.	non-conductors / electricity / it
8.	they / insulators.
9.	common insulators / glass / rubber / plastic / air
10.	a few materials / germanium / silicon / semiconductors.
11.	their ability / electricity / conductors / insulators
12.	semiconductors / an important role / modern electronics

Are you a native speaker of English? yes / no

Results for both groups were tabulated. These are set out and discussed in the following section.

Results

Table 3, below sets out the tabulated results for both the native speaking (NS) and non-native speaking (NNS) subjects.

Table 3: Tabulated responses from NS and NNS groups

POTENTIAL TOPIC	NS	NNS
Sentence 1		
the ability to carry electricity	12	31
we	3	1
most substances	5	1
one of two groups	4	7
Sentence 2		
the first group	22	28
materials	0	2
electrons	2	9
Sentence 3		
these materials	11	4
conductors	12	34
they	0	0
electric currents	1	2
Sentence 4		
conductors	21	23
metals	2	9
graphite	1	8
Sentence 5		
the second group	22	33
materials	2	3
electrons	0	4

Sentence 6		
these materials	8	3
non-conductors	16	35
conductors	0	0
electricity	0	2
Sentence 7		
non-conductors	24	29
electricity	0	10
it	0	1
Sentence 8		
they	8	5
insulators	16	35
Sentence 9		
common insulators	24	40
glass	0	0
rubber	0	0
plastic	0	0
air	0	0
Sentence 10		
a few materials	17	7
germanium	0	0
silicon	0	0
semiconductors	7	33
Sentence 11		
their ability	24	36
electricity	0	4
conductors	0	0
insulators	0	0
Sentence 12		
semiconductors	21	18
an important role	3	12
modern electronics	0	10

While there is a greater degree of variation among the second language speakers, the majority decision of the group on which was the topic of the sentence coincided with the native speaker group in all instances except for sentence 10. I shall comment briefly on each sentence, discussing what I see as the most significant outcomes.

Sentence 1: *As far as the ability to carry electricity is concerned, we can place most substances into one of two groups.*

A majority of subjects in both groups identified 'the ability to carry electricity' as the topic sentence, although there was some variation between the NS and NNS groups. Interestingly, there was greater homogeneity within the NNS group, with 80 per cent selecting 'the ability to carry electricity'. For the NS group, half of the subjects selected one of the other three options. Rather than concluding that the NNSs were better able to identify the topic of the sentence than the NS, it may be that the NNS were following a 'select the first NP' strategy (but see Sentence 2). This would suggest that a possible difference between the two groups is a greater degree of flexibility on the part of the NS in identifying a preferred topic.

Sentence 2: *The first group consists of materials with many electrons that are free to move.*

'The first group' is strongly endorsed as the preferred sentence topic by both groups, although around 25% of the NNS group opted for 'electrons'. This reversal of the outcome which obtained in relation to S1, indicates that the rather appealing suggestion that NNS were operating with a 'select the initial NP' strategy is over-simplistic and rather naive. An alternative explanation for the outcome in relation to S1 is that the variation in both groups has to do with the fact that the topic is located outside the main clause.

Sentence 3: *These materials are called conductors because they readily carry or conduct electric currents.*

The NS group are almost evenly divided with almost half of the group identifying 'these materials' as the preferred topic, and the other half opting for 'conductors'. The great majority of the NNS subjects chose 'conductors'. The split in the NS group can probably be accounted for in terms of the appositional nature of the sentence wherein 'these materials' and 'conductors' serve as synonyms within the sentence. There is evidence in other parts of the analysis to suggest that this is a reasonable interpretation, as the split exists in all of the sentences containing relational clauses (for a description and explanation of clause types, see Halliday, 1985). The strong preference of the NNS group for 'conductors' shows that definite reference rather than indefinite superordinate terms are more salient to them. Within this text 'materials' acts as a 'general noun' (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), and there is some evidence here that such items may be problematic for even relatively advanced learners.

Sentence 4: *Conductors are mostly metals but also include graphite.*

Almost all of the NS group identified 'conductors' as the topic of sentence 4. There was greater variation in the NNS group. While just half of the subjects selected 'conductors', twenty per cent opted for 'metals', and, surprisingly, another twenty per cent identified 'graphite' as the topic of the sentence. It is not immediately apparent why this was so. Those subjects selecting 'graphite' obviously failed to identify the fact that graphite is an additive element within the sentence, a fact that is explicitly signalled by 'also'.

Sentence 5: *The second group consists of materials with very few electrons that are free to move.*

Neither group had much difficulty in identifying 'the second group' as the preferred topic of sentence five, although just under twenty per cent of the NNS group selected either 'materials' or 'electrons' as the topic of the sentence. The selection of 'materials' is consistent with the hypothesis that when the two key noun phrases in a sentence refer to the same thing, confusion will result.

Sentence 6: *These materials are called non-conductors and are very poor conductors of electricity.*

This sentence parallels sentence 3, and not surprisingly, similar results were obtained, with the NS group split between 'these materials' and 'non-conductors', presumably because of their synonymity within the sentence. The NNS group opted strongly for 'non-conductors', as they did for 'conductors' in sentence 3. This corroborates the conclusion drawn there that 'general' nouns such as 'materials' may well prove problematic in the processing of written discourse.

Sentence 7: *Non-conductors can prevent electricity from going where it is not wanted.*

This sentence provides one instance in which the NS group voted unanimously for a particular item, 'non-conductors'. The non-relational nature of the clause here seems to have lowered the ambiguity for the NS group. While this was the preferred choice for the NNS group as well, twenty-five per cent also selected 'electricity'.

Sentence 8: *Hence they are also called insulators.*

Here is another example where a relational clause, in which the two NPs in the clause are synonymous, has caused a split between the NS subjects with thirty-three per cent selecting the pro-form 'they' (which also acts as the ideational theme of the sentence). There was greater agreement amongst the NNS group that 'insulators' is the topic of the sentence.

Sentence 9: *Some common insulators are glass, rubber, plastic and air.*

This was the only sentence in which there was complete agreement, both within and across groups. All readers agreed that 'some common insulators' is the topic of the sentence, and that the list of items is intended to exemplify common insulators. One could hypothesise from this that exemplification is a relatively unproblematic function for NNS. The exemplification is made clear by the provision of several examples. (It would be interesting to see whether there were less consensus if the sentences had contained only a single example, as in the relational clause 'One common insulator is glass'.)

Sentence 10: *There are a few materials, such as germanium and silicon, called semiconductors.*

The results in relation to this sentence are interesting, because there is a reversal between the NS and NNS. Most of the NS identified 'a few materials' as the sentence topic, whereas the great majority of the NNS identified 'semiconductors'. The items 'germanium' and 'silicon' which are marked as exemplification by 'such as' were clearly identified as such by both groups. There is further evidence here of a rejection by the NNS of the 'general' noun in favour of the specific item.

Sentence 11: *Their ability to conduct electricity is intermediate between conductors and insulators.*

This sentence was also relatively unproblematic. There was unanimous agreement on the part of the NS group, and near-consensus across both groups on 'their ability' as the sentence topic.

Sentence 12: *Semiconductors have played an important role in modern electronics.*

In the final sentence, most of the NS identified 'semiconductors' as the sentence topic. While this was the preferred choice for almost half of the NNS group, around 25% selected 'an important role' and another 25% opted for 'modern electronics'.

We can summarise the foregoing discussion by suggesting that the following factors appeared to have an effect on topical sentence identification by both NS and NNS subjects, although the effect was not the same on both groups:

i. Subordination: The existence of topicalised information within a subordinate clause resulted in a greater spread of subject selection on the part of NNS.

ii. Thematisation: When the theme and grammatical subject were identical, there was greater agreement on the preferred topic than when theme and subject differed.

iii. Clause type: Relational clauses in which two different NPs within the sentence referred to the same entity resulted in a lower levels of consensus, particularly amongst the NS group.

iv. Function: Certain types of function, most obviously exemplification in these data, were readily perceived as peripheral to the main topic, and were therefore not preferred as the topic by either group.

v. Referring expression: When an entity was named, as well as being referred to by a general noun and a demonstrative (two cohesive devices designed to enable the writer to maintain thematic unity from one sentence to the next), NNS opted strongly for the definite reference. For NS, the opposite was the case. This may well indicate that for even relatively advanced NNS, control of cohesion may be more problematic than is commonly thought. (There is a substantial literature which demonstrates that both NS and NNS

children have difficulty with certain aspects of cohesion well beyond the primary age level. For a review, see Nunan 1984.)

Discussion

This study was carried out in order to explore the view that 'topic' is a psychological construct rather than a linguistic concept, and, as such, resides within the creator / processor of the text, rather than within the text itself. The results, I believe, are interesting, because they demonstrate that things are much more complex than this. There are instances in which the status of a particular noun phrase clearly emerges as the topic of a sentence, even though there are several other potential competitors within the sentence itself (sentences 7, 9 and 12 for the NS group). Interestingly, the same could not be said of the NNS group. In other instances, there is a great deal of divergence, suggesting that a reader-based factor, such as background knowledge is implicated in the choice of preferred topic. In some respects, lack of consensus can be attributed to linguistic factors such as the appositional nature of a given sentence, where two competing NPs are synonyms.

The results of this study contribute to the ongoing debate on the relative contributions of linguistic and non-linguistic factors to the coherence of spoken and written discourse. It may well be that the very existence of a debate indicates a certain immaturity in this aspect of applied linguistics. I believe that arguments over whether the processing and production of coherent discourse is essentially a linguistic or a psychological issue are not helpful. This study bears out the fact that it is not simply a matter of allocating contributing factors to either linguistic or non-linguistic dimensions of discourse processing and production. Rather it is the interaction of these factors which determines successful communication. Such a view articulates with one of the outcomes of the Nunan (1994) study, namely, that so called linguistic factors (such as referential cohesion and conjunction) are utilised by writers with different levels of success according to the extent to which the writer has command of the experiential content (a so-called psychological factor).

One response to the problematic nature of the construct 'topic' would be to abandon it altogether for a concept that can be defined in linguistic terms (although, I would argue that at a certain point the linguistic / psychological / psycholinguistic distinction begins to break down). An alternative concept for researchers to embrace would be 'theme', which Halliday (1985) has defined as the 'point of departure' for the sentence - in other words, its left-most constituent. Interestingly, Halliday also describes theme as the 'psychological subject' of the sentence. For those of us who are interested in discourse coherence this is fine as long as one is dealing with sentences in which the theme or 'psychological subject' coincide with the grammatical subject; as, is indeed the case, with most of the sentences in the test passage. However, 'theme' becomes problematic in cases where the theme and the grammatical subject diverge. It is particularly problematic when the left-most element of the sentence is an adverbial group or prepositional phrase, as is the case in the following examples from Halliday (1985, p.39):

THEME	RHEME
1. once	I was a real turtle
2. very carefully	she put him back on his feet again
3. on Friday night	I go backwards to bed

In the above sentences, it cannot be said that sentence 1 is about 'once', that sentence 2 is about 'very carefully', or that sentence 3 is about 'on Friday night'.

I believe that one of the problems with research conducted to date is that researchers have attempted to identify topics within particular strings (usually NPs) within the discourse. However,

in some cases what the sentence is 'about' is captured in a paraphrase rather than a direct extract from the discourse. This is illustrated in the following text.

Text 3

Evaluation is a major component of the educational environment. In this context, evaluation is an integral, constant component. From the very first day of class, teachers and students evaluate one another. This evaluation is not only of end products, but is also present during the entire learning process. As students we evaluate the teacher. This process involves judging the teacher's appearance, teaching methods, discipline procedures, and fairness in testing and grading. In fact, almost everything about the teacher is evaluated by students. As teachers, we evaluate almost every aspect of our students. We examine critically their intellectual, social, and personal characteristics. This evaluation on the part of students and teachers occurs throughout the educational environment, outside the classroom as well as inside it.

From the topical structure diagram, which is set out as Table 4, we can see that in some instances the topic can be lifted directly from the text, but in other instances, a more accurate reflection of what a particular sentence is about is obtained through a paraphrase. I believe that in future research we ought to embrace the notion of paraphrase, where appropriate, rather than restricting sentential topics only to the words and phrases actually existing within the sentences which constitute the discourse.

Table 4: Topical structure diagram for evaluation text (Text 3)

SENTENCE	TOPIC				
	1	2	3	4	5
1	evaluation				
2	evaluation				
3		teacher and student evaluation			
4		teacher and student evaluation			
5			student evaluation		
6			student evaluation		
7				everything about the teacher	
8					teacher evaluation
9					teacher evaluation
10		teacher and student evaluation			

In terms of further research, it would be interesting to look at the contribution to the perception of sentence topic afforded by the discourse itself. This could be readily tested by replicating the study reported here, presenting the text in two conditions:]

Condition 1: as a coherent piece of discourse
Condition 2: as a collection of sentences which have been randomised.

Such a study would enable us to determine the effect that the placement of sentences within discourse may have on the perception of coherence, and specifically on the identification of topics in sentences.

Conclusion

In this paper I have set out to report on an investigation into the salience of 'topic' as a construct in discourse oriented applied linguistic research. Data were collected from two groups of subjects, a first language group and a second language group, who were asked to identify the topic of each sentence in a piece of connected discourse. Results indicated that it is simplistic to refer to constructs such as 'topic' as either belonging to the category 'linguistic construct' or 'psychological construct'. While the construct is essentially psychological, the extent to which both groups reached consensus on individual topics within individual sentences was very much determined by linguistic features of the sentences themselves and the discourse within which they reside.

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